United Nations A/63/747

General Assembly

Distr.: General
4 March 2009
English
Original: Spanish

Sixty-third session
Agenda item 65
Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance

Letter dated 24 February 2009 from the Permanent Representatives of Canada and Mexico to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

We have the honour to enclose herewith the report of the "First Regional Meeting on Enhancing International Humanitarian Partnerships", which was held in Mexico City on 10 and 11 September 2008.

This event, an initiative of the Governments of Canada and Mexico together with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, was attended by governmental and non-governmental experts from 17 countries in the hemisphere, as well as officials from the United Nations and its specialized agencies, civil society organizations and the private sector. The objectives of the meeting included improving the understanding of the role that the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs plays in the region, contributing to better coordination of humanitarian assistance at all levels, and exploring mechanisms for cooperation. The meeting created a very good opportunity for all participants to exchange best practices and laid the foundation for future work in the region aimed at improving humanitarian coordination.

We would appreciate it if you could circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the sixty-third session of the General Assembly.

(*Signed*) Claude **Heller**
Ambassador and Permanent Representative

(*Signed*) John **Mcnee**
Ambassador and Permanent Representative

09-25487 (E) 130309 170309

Annex to the letter dated 24 February 2009 from the Permanent Representatives of Canada and Mexico to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

[Original: Spanish]

Report of the First Regional Meeting on Enhancing International Humanitarian Partnerships (Mexico City, 10 and 11 September 2008)

1. This report presents the results of the First Regional Meeting on Enhancing International Humanitarian Partnerships, which took place in Mexico City on 10 and 11 September 2008. The debates, conclusions and recommendations are presented in summary form.

2. The Regional Meeting was held at the initiative of the Governments of Canada and Mexico and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The meeting was hosted by the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

3. Governmental and non-governmental experts from 17 countries in the region and officials of the United Nations and specialized agencies, civil society organizations and the private sector attended the meeting.

4. The Regional Meeting was convened in light of the fact that the number of devastating natural disasters is on the increase and the region of Latin America and the Caribbean is the second most affected region. Another factor that prompted the holding of the meeting was the fact that the region has a number of financial and non-financial mechanisms for responding to natural disasters.

5. The objectives of the Regional Meeting included improving understanding of the role of OCHA in the region in case of natural disasters, contributing to a better coordination of humanitarian assistance at all levels and exploring possibilities for cooperation on the matter.

6. The aim of the Regional Meeting was also to create an opportunity for a dialogue and exchange of information among participants best practices for responding to natural disasters.

7. The Regional Meeting laid the foundations for future work in the region to improve humanitarian coordination in case of disasters. The dialogue will continue at the second Regional Meeting in Brazil in 2009.

8. The Regional Meeting was structured around presentations, followed by discussions among participants.

9. It is worth mentioning that some of the invited experts were unable to travel to Mexico as a result of Hurricanes Gustav, Hanna and Ike, which had seriously affected the Caribbean region.

Summary of Day One

10. The first day included discussions on the general aspects of humanitarian assistance, including the people involved, the mechanisms used, achievements and challenges.

11. By way of introduction, it was underscored that as a result of the impact of climate change preventive measures and effective responses must be adopted, which entailed strengthening the capacities of States and other parties involved, as well as coordinating their action.

12. The Latin American and Caribbean region had an area of 20 million square kilometres and a population of approximately 570 million people, 75 per cent of whom live in urban areas. According to estimates, approximately one third of the region's population live in areas at high risk of natural disasters.

13. The region was the second most affected region by the impact of natural disasters in 2007, with a cost of approximately $8.5 billion, 1,200 human lives lost, and 2.7 million people affected by a total of 40 reported natural disasters.

14. It was noted that, though the structures, capacities and management differed, all the countries in the region had national disaster response mechanisms, sometimes called civil protection mechanisms, civil defence mechanisms or emergency commissions.

15. The existing mechanisms operated using various approaches to handle and respond to disasters, ranging from response through transition to recovery. That followed from the makeup of the mechanism itself (technical, inter-ministerial, intersectoral), its response capacity, and its approach to coordination in case of disasters.

16. The region also had a large number of subregional disaster response mechanisms operating under mandates from subregional organizations.

17. The coordination of humanitarian assistance in case of disasters was addressed from various perspectives: States, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. With regard to States, participants discussed the importance of safeguarding the principle that it was the responsibility of the affected State to request help and to coordinate and organize action in its territory. With respect to international organizations, the importance of their complementing the efforts of States was noted. Where non-governmental organizations were concerned, it was important that their work should benefit from the principles regulating humanitarian assistance and accountability, while for the private sector, it was clear that working in partnership with the them was a key factor in improving the coordination of humanitarian assistance.

18. The challenges faced by humanitarian assistance in case of disasters corresponded to weaknesses in its coordination. Issues referred to included obstacles to sending help, such as transportation; read tape affecting the receipt of assistance, and legal barriers; lack of controls over the delivery of provisions and supplies that in many cases did not address the immediate needs of the affected population; the mass presence of humanitarian organizations or teams of experts; a lack of policies and procedures for making an international call for help; and weaknesses in information management and reporting.

19. It was noted that the coordination of humanitarian assistance in emergency situations was understood in different ways as a result of the lack of an agreed definition of the concept, and of the fact that at the international level, its perceived meaning depended on the entity providing the assistance and on its mandate or area of specialization.

20. Nevertheless, the existence of initiatives aimed at strengthening it was recognized: they included, United Nations General Assembly resolution 46/182 of 19 December 1991, which established guiding principles for humanitarian assistance; the coordination efforts of OCHA; the humanitarian reform undertaken by OCHA, including the establishment of the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF); the International Disaster Response Laws, Rules and Principles Programme of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015, which outlined five priorities for action; the Millennium Development Goals, which provided a coherent approach to humanitarian action and combating poverty; donor coordination schemes, such as the OCHA Donor Support Group; and coordination schemes operated by the diplomatic missions of the affected country.

21. Some factors hindering coordination between the national and international levels in case of disasters were identified. These included the variety of mechanisms available to provide humanitarian assistance, their working methods, particularly with regard to initial damage assessment and information management, lack of understanding among personnel of the national context into which they were sent, non-existent or defective national coordination systems, personnel with insufficient capacity to understand the international humanitarian situation, proliferation of national ad hoc mechanisms to respond to the emergency, and lack of continuity in the various phases of the disaster.

22. Some of the aforementioned aspects were cited with regard to the experiences reported by Mexico and Nicaragua. Mexico highlighted the experience gained from the floods in the States of Chiapas and Tabasco in 2007, noting in particular that Mexico had not requested international aid since 1985 and that in 2007, there were difficulties coordinating with international aid providers, including the United Nations. In that regard, there was a need to continuously update international coordination, because the impact of disasters could go beyond States' response capacity at any given time. The experience of Nicaragua highlighted the change in the understanding of and response to disasters after Hurricanes Bertha and Felix. Now more than ever, it was important to consider actual and potential threats as a mechanism for prevention and early warning.

23. In the context of the experiences discussed, reference was made to the need to redouble efforts to ensure that national mechanisms are transparent and accountable.

24. A process to reform and finance humanitarian assistance began in 2005, aimed at achieving a better humanitarian response capacity and increase leadership, foresight and accountability in response areas. It also aims at ensuring the availability of sufficient, predictable and flexible resources, based on and proportional to the estimated needs, and at distributing and using them in the most efficient, effective and transparent way possible. Lastly, it sought to strengthen the system of humanitarian coordination and partnerships between those involved in humanitarian work.

25. The main elements of that reform included the increase in CERF, the "cluster" approach to sectoral coordination for emergency response, and the tools available for an alliance between humanitarian agencies and the private sector.

26. Finland, on behalf of the OCHA Donor Support Group, noted that the Group's role of offering advice and recommendations to OCHA with regard to humanitarian assistance administration, management and policy contributed to the implementation of humanitarian reform and encouraged strategic alliances.

27. It was recognized that the process to reform and finance humanitarian assistance was progressive, and there had been significant achievements. At the regional level, in order to further its implementation, national bodies needed to be aware of the needs and to understand and adequately use the tools of the reform, such as CERF and the sectoral coordination or "cluster" approach.

Summary of Day Two

28. The work of the second day of the Regional Meeting focused on discussing the opportunities offered by regional and subregional mechanisms for response to natural disasters, civilian-military cooperation in disaster response, interaction between national and international bodies, and public-private partnerships.

29. It was recognized that the existence of various disaster response mechanisms operating at the regional and subregional levels presented important advantages for the region, because it kept the issue constantly on the agenda of their parent organizations, and encouraged the adoption of measures that in some cases led to significant achievements. However, given that there were so many such mechanisms, it was important to adopt criteria for standards upon which to base their actions.

30. In that regard, it was pointed out that some mechanisms had decided to use the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 as a reference, as well as the agenda for adaptation to climate change. Producing an operations and terminology manual would also help the work of the various mechanisms.

31. The importance of encouraging the exchange of information among the various mechanisms in order to share experiences and best practices was also stressed. Some examples that were discussed in detail were: the drafting and implementation of the operating guidelines for mutual assistance in response to disasters in Andean States by the Andean Committee for Disaster Prevention and Response; the instruments of the Latin American and Caribbean Economic System regarding cooperation, coordination and consultation on reducing disaster risks; and the procedure manual for foreign ministries used by the Coordination Centre for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America.

32. Reference was made to the existence in the Caribbean and Pacific regions of similar initiatives coordinated by the Association of Caribbean States, the Caribbean Community and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation.

33. Those mechanisms, it was emphasized, complemented the efforts of States through bilateral or multilateral channels. It was important to create synergies at all levels in order to improve coordination among all those involved in humanitarian efforts.

34. In another session, emphasis was placed on the added value of the civil-military relationship between civilians and the military in response to natural disasters. The armed forces provided assistance in three ways: direct assistance, indirect assistance (e.g. transportation of goods) and infrastructure support.

35. OCHA had developed jointly with States a series of tools including the Oslo Guidelines, to facilitate the participation of the armed forces. In that regard, it was helpful to have a roster of military assets for air and ground transportation which could be requisitioned through donors at the request of the affected State.

36. The creation of inclusive national procedures was a determining factor in interacting with the international community in case of disasters. Argentina's experience with the White Helmets Initiative had shown that the coordination of such procedures on a voluntary basis was essential. Peru, for its part, stressed that the lessons learned from the 2007 Pisco earthquake centred on improving internal coordination capacity in order to deal with and coordinate foreign aid.

37. With regard to strategic partnerships, the Regional Meeting acknowledged that public-private partnerships were increasingly necessary and brought added value to disaster relief by virtue of their specific and specialized characteristics.

38. In order to move forward with partnerships of that kind, it was important to use the community, since only by doing so could greater impact be achieved. Another important aspect was the accountability of those involved in disaster relief, which was achieved insofar as the mandates were clear and there was mutual respect for diversity. Ericsson demonstrated that telecommunications were an essential part of communities and that when they were affected by disasters, the private sector played an essential role in supporting operators by conducting immediate assessments of infrastructure and mobilizing personnel and specialized equipment.

Conclusions and recommendations

39. The organizers of the Regional Meeting identified some actions that could facilitate the strengthening of humanitarian assistance coordination, particularly in the case of disasters:

(a) Promote better use of the existing humanitarian aid mechanisms at all levels;

(b) Add suitable information systems to the existing ones, capable of showing the magnitude of the impact and the needs of the affected population;

(c) Ensure that national, subregional and regional disaster relief mechanisms are transparent and accountable;

(d) Encourage the adoption of common standards as a reference for the work of the existing mechanisms in the region, recognizing that the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 provides guidance in this regard;

(e) Encourage strategic partnerships with the private sector that focus on reducing disaster risks, including reducing poverty as a vulnerability factor;

(f) Strengthen coordination with the OCHA Regional Office in Panama;

(g) Make the most of the advantages and opportunities presented by coordinated work involving the armed forces in dealing with and responding to disasters, where appropriate and as a last resort;

(h) Promote training at all levels of officials responsible for making decisions to request or receive international aid in emergencies;

(i) Strengthen the coordination activities carried out by the United Nations system resident coordinators in disaster situations;

(j) Work to strengthen CERF through voluntary contributions and following up on its work;

(k) Increase the participation of national experts in OCHA mechanisms such as the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team and the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group;

(l) Strengthen the national legal framework for requesting and receiving international aid in disaster situations, taking into account the initiatives of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in this regard;

(m) Encourage the compilation and exchange of experience and best practices, in the recognition that the OCHA Regional Office could support this effort.

40. At the Regional Meeting, Brazil announced its commitment to continue this initiative by offering to host the second Regional Meeting in 2009.

41. The organizers agreed to follow up on the recommendations and submit a report at the second meeting.